

Power of "Name Values"

Sunday, October 2, 2005
Proper 22, Year A

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You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth... You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. -- Exodus 20:4 and 7, NRSV.

The past 10 years have been the age of the Internet. The way we live our lives, how we gain information and how we connect to each other have been transformed by the increased availability of the Internet to the general population. Along with the advance in telecommunication and computer technology came a revolution in commerce, education and culture. During the last decade we were empowered to shop directly with retailers on the other side of the earth, and look through and choose from a vast alley of products and services. Along with it also came a less than perfect aspect of the e-commerce: proliferation of counterfeit and pirated merchandise, as well as the widespread problem with file-sharing and resulting violation of what came to be known as "intellectual property" or IP rights.

Lawyers working for big corporations have been closely monitoring the Internet for years -- looking for domain-squatters, software and music piracy and trademark violations.

One of the most common IP disputes is called "unfair competition."

For instance, let's suppose that I own an online gift shop called "Starbuck Inter-Continental Trading Company" with a website "Starbuck.biz." I sell imported arts, crafts and clothing as well as a few books and music CDs. One day I was approached by an owner of a less-known coffee roaster in Hawai'i to sell its sub-standard quality coffee at discount. Unsuspecting consumers would think, from the domain name with the word "Starbuck" in it, they can expect the same quality of coffee as that offered by the Starbucks Coffee Company in Seattle, but for a lesser price. In other words, I would be misleading consumers and more importantly, I would be *unfairly benefitting from the power associated with the name of another company*. Pretty soon I would get a certified letter from Starbucks' corporate attorney.

This week we read the twentieth chapter of Exodus, more commonly known as the Ten Commandments. And one commandment reads: "You shall not make wrong use of the name of God," or, in older translations, "use God's name in vain."

One of those e-mail jokes that circulated many years ago said, "Thou shalt not use the name of The Lord in vain, without his express written permission stating the use, context, and your agreement to pay royalties no less than \$100, but up to and including 1.5% profits derived from such usage plus a base fee of \$1500."



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*Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Isaiah 5:1-7 with Psalm 80:7-15
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46*

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The other commandment, then, would be the one against counterfeiting and piracy of God's presence: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

I think these two commandments are closely related to each other.

As humans who live in a cultural society where our social interactions are based largely on the symbols of language and culture, we recognize -- and take for granted -- that there is a power in someone's name. We "name-drop" to gain power, privilege and recognition. We seek endorsement and recommendations of the rich, famous and powerful. We buy something because of a celebrity endorsement. Politicians and big corporations seek their names be placed on prominent public facilities. Companies buy "naming rights" of ball parks. In many countries, knowing someone's name can change people's lives, even making a difference between life and death.

The ancient Hebrews and first-century Jews understood the power of spoken names. This was why the Jews made it a major taboo to pronounce God's name. The name of God symbolized the fullness of all that God is -- something even greater than the sum of all the universe. And the first generation of followers of Jesus used his name to heal the sick, cast the demons and take authority over the spiritual and natural realms. They believed that the name of Jesus itself has the same power as Jesus while he was living on earth.

Misusing God's name means unfairly benefitting from what is not rightfully yours, while it misleads people.

Because of this, we must be vigilant against our temptation to use God's name to promote our ego or to project our own insecurity against others. This includes misuse of Bible verses or even calling your opinions and agenda "God's will" or "Christian value." This amounts to putting our own words in God's mouth, and in so doing give our words more power than they should have. Likewise, we have to guard ourselves against inventing our own idols -- projecting our own ego, fear, anger and hatred on the spiritual realm and calling it "God." This, too, removes ourselves from the ultimate responsibility and places all the blames on God, while enabling us to avoid facing our own monster within.

May God give us honesty and openness so we can face and live out of our own truths without covering our own issues up behind God's name. May we have courage and confidence so we can speak the truth to each other and to God.

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